

Planned Parenthood program gets national use

By Hon Walker
Emerald Reporter

Parents have the potential to be the most effective conductors of sexuality education to their children, said Mary Widoff, education director for Planned Parenthood of Lane County.

However, she said many parents either do not feel comfortable discussing the facts of life with their children, or do not recognize the importance of open and honest communication.

To improve this avenue of communication, Widoff has developed a program for parents, "There's No Place Like Home ... For Sex Education," which was distributed statewide last year and received attention on a national level in January.

"It has the potential of impacting hundreds of thousands of parents and children in a topic area that can be so difficult," she said.

Widoff's sex education program consists of groups of five newsletters for parents of children in various ages and grade level. The first newsletter group is oriented toward those with three-year-old children, with more newsletters for each year through grade six.

Copies of the newsletters have been distributed to all Oregon school districts, as well as state pediatricians, churches, women's shelters and county health departments.

In addition, all Planned Parenthood affiliates in the nation have received the newsletters. Many areas are planning statewide distribution similar to Oregon's.

"I feel incredibly grateful. It feels like I really have the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives," Widoff said.

She began developing her program in early 1988, following the philosophy that parents should be empowered with information and strategies for their children's sex education.

The sex education process begins at birth, she said, with infants receiving gender mes-

sages coming from colors of clothes, choices of toys, and affection, among other sources. Even at age three, a child has been educated extensively through a parent's verbal or non-verbal communication, she said.

If a parent establishes a basic foundation of trust and understanding during the child's first few years, educating the child about more complex issues can be easier as he or she moves into puberty and adolescence, Widoff said.

A unique factor of Widoff's education program is that parents are not instructed what to say to their children, but rather are assisted in interpreting their own values.

"What we try to do is to allow parents to pass on their family values in a way that's very healthy and positive," she said. A focus on how to communicate instead of what to communicate allows flexibility for effective sex education from parents of varying backgrounds, cultures and religions.

Widoff's program provides basic information of sexual development in children, along with strategies for appropriately answering common questions.

A goal in answering typical questions on sexuality is "to frame the message positively so kids will come out of it not feeling that they've done something wrong or that they've touched on a taboo," Widoff said.

Few parents realize the importance of being open with their children about sex education, she added, noting that open and honest communication about it exists in fewer than 10 percent of families.

In the changing climate of sexual attitudes in the age of AIDS, the need is greater in the late 1980s than ever, Widoff said. "Sexual decisions can be a matter of life and death."

In addition, children receive frequent media messages about sex, which is another need for open communication. "Nowa-

days we recognize that kids are sexually active at a much younger age," she said.

Widoff emphasized that her program is intended to be a supplement to school sex education curriculum, not a replacement. "It's a way of helping schools and parents work together in a partnership," she said.

Publication and distribution of the newsletters was funded in part by grants from the Collins Foundation, the Herbert A. Templeton Foundation and the Oregon Community Foundation, Widoff said.

A second phase of the program, consisting of a series of newsletters aimed at adolescents from seventh to 12th grades, is now in the works. It will receive additional funding from the Fred Meyer Charitable Trust and the Jackson Foundation, she added.

The program's second phase will reach Oregon school districts and national Planned Parenthood affiliates this fall, and it is expected to eventually reach the same widespread distribution level as the first phase, Widoff said.

The widespread distribution of Widoff's program has resulted in positive feedback from around the nation.

PPALC Executive Director Bill Sheppard said, "We're extremely pleased with the overwhelming response we're receiving."

Widoff's program appeals to a wide range of people because it addresses issues in a sensitive manner while assisting parents in effectively communicating their personal values, Sheppard added.

Widoff said she has received only one negative response to her program, from a Portland-area church. Many supporters, ranging from parents to fundamentalist pre-school teachers,

have sent cards and phone calls praising the program.

"It's really taking off," said Maria Matthews, associate director of Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Inc., in New York. "It's wonderful. It needs to be given to every parent in the country and to students at every grade level."

"What we're hoping is that folks will adapt it for their own communities and do what Mary's been able to do in Oregon," Matthews said.

In addition, Matthews said

Widoff's program will help Planned Parenthood's image. The organization often is in conflict with foes of birth control and abortion, but it also aims to provide extensive education. The new program is a fresh example of this, Matthews said.

"We hope the program will stimulate parents to read other texts, attend workshops and get more information" to educate their children, Matthews said. "We're delighted that Oregon has taken the lead."

COMPUTER SCANNING

- CONVERT PAPER TO COMPUTER!
- ALL MACINTOSH FORMATS
- HI RES GRAPHICS AND O.C.R. TEXT
- FAST OVERNIGHT SERVICE
- STUDENT DISCOUNTS

Open 9:00 to 5:00 M-F

AMALGAMATION

5120 FRANKLIN BLVD. #3 747-4589

University Neighborhood Dentist

Gentle care for students for 16 years.

Student Discount Available

J. Scott Baxter, D.M.D., P.C.

622 E. 22nd Ave Building F
(corner of Patterson & 22nd) **344-6371**

40¢ off one Gyros or Falafel at STUFF IT

1219 Alder 343-3062
expires 6/5/89

BUSY? GET TAN QUICK!!!

We've got your tan when you want it!

SunShower on campus
485-2323 • 874 E. 13th
Updated by Koko's

EVEN THE PICKIEST PEOPLE FIND GLASSES

THEY LIKE AT RAINBOW OPTICS

rainbow optics

Hours: 8 am to 7 pm, Mon. - Fri.
Saturday, 8 am to 5 pm
Visa and Mastercard accepted

766 E. 13th Ave.
Just one block from campus
343-3333

THE FAR SIDE By GARY LARSON

© 1989 Chronicle Features
Distributed by Universal Press Syndicate